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ABSTRACT

The National Education Association (NEA, with 1.8 million members) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT, with 600,000 members) are politically powerful teacher unions attempting to change America's educational politics. With enormous financial and manpower resources, these unions maintain effective lobbying groups seeking favored legislation and political machines supporting local, state, and national candidates. Teacher unions have become the chief representatives of American education. This paper evaluates teacher unions' political effectiveness. On balance, the unions have been reasonably effective; they have successfully supported mayors, governors, state legislators, members of Congress, and one U.S. President, Jimmy Carter. However, their power has not been absolute. Teacher unions did not become politically active until the mid-1960s, when political action committees supporting local candidates were formed. Teacher unions' power is weakened by their intense organizational rivalry and their differences concerning certain educational, social, and political objectives. The NEA, originally more conservative, has moved to an extremely liberal orientation; the AFT, which long supported a liberal, even radical agenda, has moved slightly to the right of center. Since 1972 both unions have supported only Democratic candidates for President, but by 1980 the NEA and AFT were supporting rival candidates in the Democratic presidential primaries. Generally, both unions have been reactive to contemporary school reform efforts. From the equity wave of the 1960's to the excellence movement of the 1980's, they have been followers, rather than initiators. Although both unions are opposed to competency tests for experienced teachers, vouchers, and tuition tax credits, NEA has become suspicious of the excellence movement, and AFT is more comfortable with it. Various other ideological differences are discussed at length. Included are 46 references. (MLH)

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The Influence of Teacher Unions In Politics

By Maurice R. Berube

Teacher unions have become one of the most powerful political constituencies in the nation. The National Education Association, with 1.8 million members, and the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, with 600,000 members, are changing American educational politics. With enormous financial and manpower resources, the teacher unions maintain effective lobbying arms seeking favored legislation and political machines supporting local, state and national candidates --- including the presidency. Teacher unions have become the chief representatives of education in America.

On balance, the teacher unions have been reasonably effective in their political and legislative endeavors. They have successfully supported Mayors, Governors and State Legislators, members of Congress and even one President of the United States. They have reaped the rewards of their political involvement by having much of legislative program adopted and stopped much that has been opposed. However, their power has not been absolute.

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Mitigating their political power is the intense organizational rivalry between the two teacher unions. And the two unions have grown to differ markedly in some educational goals as well as other social and political objectives. In the past generation, the NEA, ironically, has moved from a position of promoting the status quo to an extremely liberal orientation. By contrast, the AFT which long exposed a liberal -- and at times a radical --- agenda, has moved slightly to the right of center. Although both unions have remained in the Democratic camp, for the most part, their philosophical differences would often result in the NEA and AFT supporting opposing candidates in the primaries.

Although the teacher unions have had considerable political success, they have been reactive to school reform during the past generation. From the equity school reform wave of the 1960's to the excellence school movement of the 1980's, the teacher unions have proved followers rather than active initiators. Because of the NEA and AFT organizational rivalry for members, and their different philosophical constructs, the NEA and AFT are not in a position to initiate deep seated educational change. Perhaps, that role, which one would expect of the most organized constituency in education, will only become possible with the merger of the two unions. However, prospects for merger are not forseeable in the near future.

The Rise of Teacher Politics

The teacher unions became involved in politics only during the past generation. Although the NEA and the AFT had long maintained lobbying efforts it wasn't until the mid-1960's that political action committees supporting candidates were formed on a local level and in the early 1970's when they were created on a national level.

Most important, teacher politics was the natural heir to the break-through in collective bargaining for teachers in 1961 in New York City. With the ability to negotitae union contracts and the wide-spread teacher rebellion that ensued, it was but one short step to consider political involvement.

The rationale to enter the political areana was a logical progression form union growth. School budgets are determined by local, state and congressional officials. Public agencies controlled by elected politicians determined the course of public education in America. Union leaders concluded that they must act beyond the domain of collective bargaining. Political Action Committees had already been established by their professional bretheren --- doctors and lawyer.

The first NEA PAC was created in Utah in 1965. By 1969 there were 22 state NEA PAC's.1 By 1972, the national NEA office created its own PAC.2 The AFT would create its national PAC, the Committee on Political Education, in 1972 although various locals had supported candidates since the 1960's.3

Teacher organizations now possesse enormous human and financial resources. In the 1980 presidential campaign, for example, one observer claimed that the NEA had enlisted 500,000 volunteer to work on behalf of their candidate Jimmy Carter.4 The NEA boasts more money --- some 375 million dollars as of 1984 --- than the entire labor movement.5 Among contributors to federal candidates, the NEA is the fifth largest benefactor, two notches behind the American Medical Association, whose members have the highest incomes in the United states.6 Few organizations carry the clout of the teacher unions.

But that power is not limited to national office. The teacher unions are extremely effective in local and state politics. In New York State, for example, the one AFT dominated state, over a half million dollars for state political activity was raised in 1984.7 The New York State United Teachers AFL-CIO maintains seven full time lobbyists and six employees working on political activities.8 The California Teachers Association (NEA) is considered the second richest lobby behind the oil companies.9

The Effectiveness of Teacher Politics

The teacher unions have been enormously successful in politics. They have helped elect one President: Jimmy Carter in 1976. On a national level they have exerted immense influence. From 1973 to 1984 NEA-PAC endorsed candidates won 76% of the elections.10 In that time they endorsed 2,062 candidates and helped elect 1,572.11 In 1974, NEA-PAC claimed the highest winning percentage among major political action committees. In 1986 Congressional election 80% of NEA backed candidates won.12 The AFT has become also increasingly effective nationally and in 1986 had its best winning percentage when 80% of their endorsed congressional candidates won. 13

This success is even more dramatic on state and local levels. For example, in the 1986 state elections in New York the AFT affiliate proved its strong influence. In this the only state dominated by the AFT, 94% of New York State United Teachers, AFL-CIO, endorsed candidates won.14 Most important of the 30 contested elections 29 candidates endorsed by NYSUT won --- a sign of union strength.15 In addition, the NYSUT-backed candidates for Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, and Comptroller won. What is especially significant is that the candidate supported for Governor, Mario Cuomo, a was leading Democratic Presidential possible candidate at that time. It was no accident that NYSUT support came early and strong so that by the Gubernatorial election NYSUT had become the second largest

contributor to the Governor's gubernatorial and possible presidential campaign fund.16

But the strength of the teacher unions has been evident on a local level as well. A case in point has been the AFT New York City local, the United Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, and its power in local school board elections. Since school decentralization in the early 1970's, the UFT has been a power in community school board elections. This was no more evident than in the 1986 community school board elections. These elections, operating under a state decentralization law that included a complicated proportional representation formula, favored organized slates. Consequently, in 1986, UFT backed candidates won majorities in 25 and 32 community school boards, thus making the UFT a dominant force in education in New York City.17

It is understandable that the UFT, which had opposed decentralization in the late 1960's would now reverese its position with ist success in school politics. They now resist a move led by New York City central school board chairman, Robert Wagner Jr., to have the State Legislature abolish elected community school boards. Wagner cited the low turnout at school board election, their cost, and most important, their favoring of slates, as reasons to abolish the boards. On the other hand, a number of State legislators from New York City favor only doing away with slate voting. The UFT prefers the status quo.

Criticism of Teacher Politics

It was inevitable that the teacher unions be casitgated for their role in politics. That criticism came mostly from conservatives who objected to the teacher unions being firmly entrenched in the Democratic Party camp -- and most important, -- for supporting a successful Democrat, Jimmy Carter, in the White House in 1976. However, that criticism was levied wholly at the NEA, which had moved to the left in the 1970's. The AFT was spared criticism since it had moved ideologically slightly to the right of center, but which had still supported Democrats for President.

The criticisms of the NEA were varied. They were accused of being a captive of the Democratic Party, hostile to the capitalist economy, against the preservation of the family, soft on communism, and finally, detrimental to the best interests of education.

These conservative broadsides appeared in such journals as the National Review, Reader's Digest, Commentary, and TIME Magazine. Even the neo-liberal New Republic and the educational journal Phi Delta Kappan were hostile to teacher politics. Only in the pages of THE NATION did the NEA receive a welcome for its political activity.

In addition, a former Southern school board member organized a lobby, SAVE OUR SCHOOLS, which by spring of 1985 had some 150,000 supporters in 50 states and an operating budget of $1,626,000. 18 SAVE OUR SCHOOLS "believes the National Education Association (NEA) is a threat to traditional moral values and educational standards of the United States".19 Their aim was to raise sufficient monies to promote a television expose' of the NEA.

A right wing attack on the subject of 1985 book by Samuel L. Blumenfeld, entitled NEA:_Trojan_Horse_in_American_Education. Blumenfeld assailed the NEA as "little more than the socialist Trojan horse within our political walls".20

Perhaps the most stringent criticism that could be made of the teacher unions is their predilection for Democratic party candidates -- mostly on a national level. They have supported only Democratic Party candidates since the AFT backed a Presidential candidate in 1972 and the NEA began supporting Presidential candidates in 1976. Moreover, the teacher unions have supported mostly Democrats for Congress. In 1984, the NEA supported 26 candidates for the United States Senate, none of whom were Republicans, and 304 candidates for the House of Representatives, only 16 of whom were Republicans, 21 and the AFT followed suit.21 In 1984, the AFT endorsed 14 candidates for the Senate, all of whom were Democrats, and 134 candidates for the House, only two of whom were Republicans.22

Officials of the teacher unions argue that favoring Democrats is based on those candidates most closely advocating educational and social concerns that are in line with the teacher unions philosophies. They rhetorically profess that they are "bi-partisan" in orientation.23

Certainly, in New York State the AFT affiliate has been bi-partisan. In the 1986 state elections, the AFT affiliate endorsed 32 Republicans and 23 Democrats in the Senate, and 49 Republicans and 76 Democrats in the Assembly.24 It must be remembered, however, that New York is a politically liberal state where the Republicans tend to be liberal to moderate.

Presidential Politics

The teacher unions have had their greatest political visibility --- and, concommitantly, engendered the greatest controversy --- in supporting Democratic Party Presidential candidates. But the evidence suggests that the NEA and AFT may exert their greatest influence in Democratic Party presidential primaries rather than in elections that depend on complicated national variables.

The teacher unions have helped successfully elect only one President in the last decade and a half; Jimmy Carter in 1976. The unions lost with Carter in 1980 and Mondale in 1984. However, they were instrumental in choosing a Democratic Presidential candidate in the primaries.

In 1976, the NEA sent 265 delegates to the Democratic convention.25 And the AFT sent more delegates than any other AFL-CIO union.26 Both unions supported Carter. By 1980, the NEA and AFT supported rivals in the Democratic presidential primary. The NEA continued to support Carter whereas the AFT, under President Albert Shanker's urging, supported Senator Edward (Ted) Kennedy. (D-Mass.) The AFT sought to gain favor of a possible President free from the rival influence of the larger and more dominant NEA. At the 1980 Democratic convention the NEA mustered its greatest show of strength. The NEA sent 464 delegates and 169 alternates for Carter --- one tenth of all delegates, and one in seven of Carter delegates.27 Moreover, at that same convention eleven NEA teachers were members of the party's platform committee. By 1984, the NEA would send some 270 delegates for Mondale to the Democratic convention --- along with AFT delegates for Mondale.28

A survey by the NEA of members in 1984 shows that 41% are registered Democrats and 28% registered Republicans.29 In 1980, 44% voted for Carter and 41% voted for Reagan.30 In 1984, 56% of the NEA membership voted for Mondale whereas 44% chose Reagan.31 In short, the teacher unions have displayed their greatest strength in the selection of a Presidential nominee in the primary process.

The Limits of Power

The political strength of the teacher unions has been established. However, this political power has limits. The NEA and the AFT are not always successful despite substantial financial and manpower resources. Moreover, the NEA and the AFT may oppose one another in political campaigns, especially in the primaries.

Nowhere was that more apparent than in two Congressional campaigns in 1986 that attracted national attention. First, there was the campaign for the House of Representatives in the 8th District in the Boston area, where a Kennedy, nephew of John F. Kennedy, ran and won over opponents who appeared superior in background and experience. Second, there was a campaign for the U.S. Senate in Maryland where two women opposed each other for only the second time in history. In both cases, the NEA candidate lost despite superior manpower and financial resources

whereas the AFT candidate won despite a weaker local union. However, both cases illustrate the complexity of democratic politics.

Joseph Kennedy, II, entered politics for the first time by running for the 8th District Congressional seat in Boston. He was the oldest son of former Senator and Presidential aspirant Robert Kennedy, nephew of President John Kennedy and current U.S. Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy. Although the least accomplished of a slate of nine Democratic candidates he was considered the frontrunner. The district had been the same from which John F. Kennedy had launched a career first as Congressman then Senator and finally President. His great-grandfather John "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, had been a popular Mayor of Boston and the district was staunchly Democratic. In 1984, only 36% of the district voters chose Ronald Reagan, one of the lowest tallies for the President in the nation.32

However, the District possessed a split personality. It was composed of affluent liberals, mostly connected with the universities, and a sizable working class. In that respect, it mirrored the contending elements within the Democratic party nationally. Kennedy became the candidate of the working class, whereas, State Senator George Bachrach, the NEA's choice, was the candidate of affluent liberals. Kennedy won a close contest. Bachrach, his main opponent, even surpassed Kennedy in the polls at one time.

Kennedy had many political deficits. His only experience was as head of a private energy group aiding the poor. He had a checkered academic career transferring from two preparory schools and three colleges.33 Moreover, he carried the Kennedy "curse" in that he was convicted in 1973 of reckless driving in an accident that left a girl paralyzed below the waist.34

Still, the Kennedy name carried a political "magic". The political establishment supported Kennedy. Retiring House of Representatives Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill of the same district endorsed Kennedy as did Mayor Raymond L. Flynn, and the liberal newspaper The Boston Globe and the conservative Boston Herald. Moreover, Kennedy had support from national political leaders, such as Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young and Coretta Scott King, the widow of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Massachusettes Teachers Association, the NEA Affliate, however challenged the Kennedy tide and supported Bachrach. On the other hand, the AFT affliate, the Boston Federation of Teachers endorsed Kennedy. The MTA was the larger unit with 61,000 teachers statewide. However, the BFT had all of its members in Boston, 12,000, whereas the MTA had only 5,000 NEA members in Boston.35

Why did the NEA support Bachrach? According to NEA officials, Bachrach had a 100% NEA record in the State house and the "MTA had a debt to Bachrach, and it's just good politics in the long run to stick with your friends in education, otherwise you'll lose credibility".36 Moreover, Bachrach's more liberal positions on national and foreign policy issues made him more attractive to the NEA.

Another nationally significant contest in the 1986 Congressional elections was for the U.S. Senate in Maryland. In that race, the scenario presumed that a long term popular centrist Democrat, Congress-woman Barbara Mikulski, would oppose a Republican Presidential aide, Linda Chavez. Chavez had once been a member of the staff of the AFT in Washington.

Again, however, the NEA supported an unsuccessful candidate Congressman Michael Barnes. There was little difference between the record of Barnes and Mikulski on most social issues. However, Barnes had been instrumental in supporting a chief pet project of the NEA, a Department of Education. Moreover, his criticism of the Reagan policy in Central America brought him more in line with NEA beliefs.

And again the NEA affliate, the Maryland States Teacher's Association, was the dominant one in the state with 33,000 members. And again, the AFT affliate, the Baltimore Teacher's Union endorsed Mikulski, however, the smaller BTU had 6,000

members.37 The city of Baltimore was a Democratic Party enclave that accounted for 60% of registered Democrat's in the primaries.38 Crucial to those demographics was the fact that Baltimore was Mikulski's home city. She went on to defeat Barnes, and, in turn, Linda Chavez the Republican nominee.

In both cases NEA local unions were more powerful but were not as strategically placed. Most important, the NEA chose not to support the political frontrunners out a sense of past political obligations.

Ideological Differences Between the Unions

Although similarities exist between the NEA and AFT, both are bitter organizational - and to some extent -- political rivals. Their politics are determined by significant, if not dramatic, ideological differences. The NEA has tended to move to the left of the political spectrum, whereas the AFT has moved, on some matters, slightly to the right of political center. Although the two unions are, for the most part, aligned with the Democratic Party they represent contending wings in that party.

The two teacher unions differ on fundamental educational and social issues. In education, the NEA and the AFT differ on some important issues but agree on matters that severely threaten the existence of public schooling. A key political demand of the NEA

--- the creation of a Department of Education --- was opposed by the AFT. NEA officials believed that there should be a substantial increase in the federal role in education, with federal funding to raise to one third of educational costs from 8% of current funding. The Department of Education was perceived as a step towards a more national system of education. AFT officials had not thought through the issue of federal involvement but opposed the creation of such a Department. AFT President Shanker argued that creating such a department merely for "prestige" was "not a good reason" since it would "build but one more bureacratic layer in Education".39 In addition, the NEA and the AFT differ on supporting bi-linqual programs with the former supporting and the latter opposing.

Both unions agree on competency tests, vouchers and tuition tax credits. The NEA and the AFT support competency tests only for beginning teachers. They oppose competency tests for experienced teachers. In addition, AFT President Albert Shanker has called for a national licensing examination system. The NEA is more adamant on competency tests, with NEA officials concerned about the performance of minority teachers on those examinations. This is not fully shared by AFT officials; Shanker perceives no real concern over the depletion of minority teachers through competency test calling for "intensive help" in the public schools instead to educate minorities.40

But the two unions are most united over their opposition to vouchers and tuition tax credits that would aid private schools. Both unions helped stop the Reagan administration's attempt to establish a voucher plan for Chapter I students. Shanker argued that the administration plan would allow private schools to "discriminate along racial or religious lines" and would "pit one group of parents against another."41 NEA President Mary Hatwood Futrell would call the Reagan plan a "cruel hoax" for the poor that "signals further retreat" from successfully educating the poor.42 The Reagan bill did not even get to the floor of Congress.

The most important difference between the NEA and the AFT has been on race. Ironically, the NEA which has maintained segregated locals has become senitive to the issue, whereas the AFT which had expelled segregated locals and been in the forefront of the civil rights movement, has moved away from that liberal position. The NEA supports affirmative action programs whereas the AFT opposes them. Both filed opposing amicus curiae briefs in the 1976 Bakke Supreme Court decision. Moreover, the NEA maintains a quota system guaranteeing minority representation among union officers, which the AFT denounces.

Finally, both unions have expounded positions on foreign policy that have significantly differed. Although such issues are far removed from the immediate concerns of teachers, they do indicate differing union philosophies. The NEA under the

leadership of Terry Herndon, Executive Director from 1973 to 1983, pursued a policy aligned with the international peace movement. In 1981, the NEA at its Representative Assembly officially went on record opposing nuclear conflict.43 An NEA teaching manual entitled, CHOICES: A UNIT ON CONFLICT AND NUCLEAR WAR, was published and 15,000 copies were sold by April of 1986.44

On the other hand, the AFT under Shanker pursues a hard line anti-communism. Shanker criticized in particular the NEA anti-war teaching manual as "propaganda" that attempted to "press one viewpoint".45 In short, he argued that the NEA should not bring "political, moral and economic issues" into the classroom. NEA officials replied that they "suspected (Shanker) of brushing his teeth with gunpower."46

CONCLUSION

This study argues that the teacher unions have substantive impacts in the political sphere. However, theirs has been primarily a watchdog role. The teacher unions have yet to become the initiators of sweeping educational change in America. Educational reform has come about in the past generation from outside forces. In the 1960's, the civil right movement focused on education and made equity a prime goal -- the education of the disadvantaged. In the 1980's the "excellence" reform movement to

educate the best and brightest was the result of foreign economic competition, especially from Japan.

The NEA has been suspicious of the "excellence" reform movement advancing the equity agenda. By contrast, the AFT has become more comfortable with the "excellence" reform movement. But the bottom line is that school reform, once more, has merged from outside the confines of the teacher unions. For the most powerful political constituency in education, one would expect more.

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